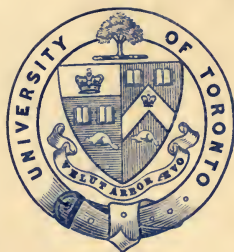




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APELEUTHERUS;

X

OR,

AN EFFORT TO ATTAIN

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM.

IN THREE PARTS.

- I. ON PUBLIC WORSHIP.
- II. ON RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.
- III. ON CHRISTIANITY AS A SUPERNATURAL COMMUNICATION.

[By William Sturch.]

neque nostræ disputationes quicquam aliud agunt, nisi ut, in utramque partem dicendo, eliciant, et tanquam exprimant aliquid, quod aut verum sit, aut ad id, quam proxume accedat. CIC. ACADEM. Lib. ii.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. PAUL, 1 Cor. xiii.

In regard to religious matters, there is an intellectual cowardice instilled into the mind of the people from their infancy, which prevents their enquiry. Credulity is made an indispensable virtue; to enquire, or exert their reason, is denounced as sinful; and in the catholic church is punished with more severe penances than moral crimes. DARWIN'S Zoonomia, Vol. ii.

L O N D O N:

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DEDICATION.

D. O. M.

O THOU, whose bounty gave this mantling bower
Where, from the world retired, I oft recline,
And trace thy wonder-working hand divine,
And read thy name in every blushing flower;
Sovereign of nature, all-directing power!

Great source of being, life, and light, and joy!

To Thee I dedicate this best employ,

This sweetest solace of the silent hour.

O search this heart, that seeks no vain disguise,

Accept the tribute, and the labour blest:

View the pure motive with approving eyes—

Thy glory, in thy creatures happiness.

Smile on the page that bids the mind be free,

And points the path to Virtue, and to Thee!

P R E F A C E.

THE desire of knowledge, if it be cherished with a view to the improvement of moral practice, and the increase of human felicity, is, of all the qualities and dispositions of the mind, the most honourable to its possessor. But if he would derive from it all the advantage of which it is capable, or accomplish in any important degree his noble aim, it must be cultivated with unbounded freedom, and with ardent affection. No doctrine must in his estimation be so unquestionable, no authority so sacred, as to bar enquiry. He must be, in the best and most extensive sense of the phrase, a FREETHINKER. Nor must the lover of truth be diverted from his object by the difficulties which he will have to encounter in the pursuit of it. The acquisition of so precious a jewel will be to him a full

recompence for all his labour : and being once in possession of it, though he may not, perhaps, think it prudent at all times to expose it to the view of others, lest he should be casting his pearl before swine, he will himself value it above all earthly treasure, and will never be induced, by any consideration, to abandon it.

The liberal enquirer, indeed, cannot be expected to feel that attachment to system, and that degree of zeal for the conversion of others, which is known to animate those who profess what is commonly called orthodoxy ; and who supposing the favour of Heaven to be confined to the belief of a set of speculative notions, some of which they acknowledge to be unintelligible, must consequently, if they have the common feelings of humanity, be anxiously concerned for their general reception. He who is persuaded, that it is the uniform and unchangeable doctrine, both of natural and supernatural religion, that *every upright man must be happy* in every stage of his existence,

existence, is no farther desirous of the prevalence of any opinion, than as it appears to be calculated to affect moral practice. He has often had occasion to observe—such is the bias in favour of virtue in the human constitution—that to FEAR GOD AND TO DEPART FROM EVIL, are dispositions by no means peculiar to any speculative system: and if he find a man in possession of these genuine evidences of TRUE WISDOM, he cannot persuade himself to indulge any very deep distress about the absurdity of his faith. The reputed orthodox therefore may hold fast and inculcate their dogmas, without abridging his happiness; and if what he may offer on his part be received with candour and attention, his wishes are completely gratified.

The author is perfectly aware, that this is too much to hope for the following essays from the generality of readers; and it is this consideration that has determined him, though reluctantly, to send his little book into the world *without his name*. He feels

no inward reproach on reviewing this employment of his leisure hours. He apprehends no censure, from the truly liberal and enlightened, on its publication. But while he sees no important purpose to be answered, by the disclosure of his name; he thinks himself justified, in yielding to considerations of prudence and personal quiet. He views with admiration, that intrepidity of soul, and firmness of nerve, which enable a man to encounter the scorn of superstition, and the rage of bigotry. He honours the bold spirit of a Luther, and a Wakefield; the fearless integrity of a Price, and a Priestley: but he confesses that he is unequal to the imitation of these illustrious characters—he renounces all claim to any portion of the praise, which is so justly their due—he is unambitious of reputation—he courts obscurity.

It has long been his favourite maxim, that it behoves every man to devote some portion of his life to the public; to aim at something by which his fellow men may be advantaged.

Every

Every man, indeed, does not possess the powers of a Locke or a Hartley; but the means and opportunities of advancing the public weal are infinitely various; and singularly hard must be the lot of him who can truly say, that he is, by nature or by fortune, utterly incapable, in any degree or in any manner, of deserving well of his country and of mankind.

In magna copia rerum, aliud alii natura iter ostendit *. And if in these humble essays, the author shall have been able to contribute any thing towards the demolition of the old and tottering fabric of error and superstition; if he shall have added only a few “grains of gun-powder†,” to that train which is destined,

* Sallust. Bell. Catalin.

† “The present silent propagation of truth may even be compared to those causes in nature which lie dormant for a time, but which in proper circumstances act with the greatest effect. We are, as it were, laying gun-powder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, &c.” PRIESTLEY on the Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry, p. 40.

The alarm occasioned by the use of this harmless metaphorical language was highly ridiculous. I shall not easily forget

tined, sooner or later, to level it with the ground ; he will have reason to thank Heaven, that he has not lived in vain.

He is willing to flatter himself, that if his views of the several subjects of which he has treated be just, the communication of his thoughts may be of use to others. If, on the contrary, the voice of impartial and judicious criticism should pronounce them to be false and groundless, he earnestly hopes they will make no impression. If he has failed, however, it has not been through haste or inattention. He does not present to his readers what cost him nothing ; but the result of long-continued and serious meditation. It

forget being in the gallery of the House of Commons, when the respectable member for Oxford, Sir W. D. with a tone of voice and a countenance,

“ That witnessed huge affliction and dismay,”

announced the discovery of this new gunpowder plot ! The consternation of the worthy Baronet could scarcely have been greater, if he had actually found a second Guy Faux with his matches and dark lantern, ready to explode his thirty-six barrels of real gunpowder, to the destruction of King, Lords, and Commons !

would have been comparatively easy to have written volumes ; but as truth gains nothing by prolix dissertation, he has been at considerable pains to compress his ideas into the compass of three short essays ; and he trusts he has done it so as to avoid obscurity. If the reasoning in the two first of these essays be correct, it will appear, that the clerical profession is one of those which, without loss to the world, might be wholly discontinued. And if, in the third, he has succeeded in endeavouring to exhibit a faithful sketch of genuine christianity, it will follow, that in whatever estimation it may deservedly be held, as a luminous and comprehensive scheme of religion and morals, it is neither possible, nor of much importance, to determine with certainty, whether its pretensions to supernatural authority be true or false.

He has only to add, that his motives are of the purest kind. No party connexion or private interest, has corrupted his mind, or warped his judgment. He can discern no merit,

merit, either in a bigoted attachment to received opinions on the one hand, or in a rage for departing from them as widely as possible, on the other. It is the first wish of his heart, that the light of TRUTH may be more and more extensively diffused, and that in proportion to its diffusion, the human race may become virtuous and happy.

September 1, 1799.

APELEUTHERUS.

PART I.

ON PUBLIC WORSHIP.

THE being, the perfections, and the providence, of the Supreme Eternal Spirit whom we call GOD, are clearly manifest in the constitution and course of nature. The perception and belief of these sublime truths indeed, and consequently their influence on the conduct, will be, as in all other cases, stronger or weaker, in proportion to the attention that is paid to them. To the observing mind they must necessarily be the subject of frequent meditation and reflection; and sometimes, especially in seasons of difficulty, they will be recollected by the most careless and dissipated of mankind. In the former will be produced habitual reverence, gratitude, love, and

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confidence;

confidence; and these affections, whether expressed in words or not, will naturally rise from the feeling heart, like pure incense from the altar, towards that Being who “is good to all, and whose tender mercies are over all his works*.” And even the latter, whose general character is supposed to be inattention and thoughtlessness, though he may be little disposed to “praise the Lord for his goodness†,” will not be able, in the hour of calamity, when all human help seems to fail, to avoid wishing, and even *praying*, for that protection and assistance which can only be afforded by Him who “ruleth by his power for ever‡.” In short, prayer naturally follows the belief of a God: and to suppose a finite dependent creature, living under a sense of divine providence, and impressed with those feelings which are the genuine fruit of just views of his glorious character, and yet abstaining wholly from *any sort* of direct address to him, seems contrary to all experience, and absurd in itself.

* Pf. cxlv. 9.

† Pf. cvii.

‡ Pf. lxvi. 7.

But,

has never pictured any benefits to be derived from public worship, which can compensate for the direful consequences of sectarian zeal. The former may perhaps have contributed something to the consolation of pious ignorance; the latter has deluged the world with blood!

Again. It has been said, that it is our duty to endeavour to impress the minds of those with whom we are connected, and especially of the members of our own family, with religious and moral ideas; and that public worship is a means to this end. The reply is, that this end, important beyond all that language can express, may be more effectually answered, by private instruction and exhortation, both regular and occasional; by recommending to them such books as are best calculated to inform their understandings, and to inspire them with the love of truth and goodness; and, above all, by setting before them, in our own persons, an uniform and consistent example of integrity and virtue. It is, however, by no means the intention of the writer to affirm, that when a private family, or a small number of friends, are assembled

affembled for any important purpose—for instance, when they sit down together for mutual instruction and improvement, by reading or conversation—they are not at liberty, if they find themselves so disposed, to unite in some short acknowledgment of their common dependence upon one supreme Being, and some concise petition for his blessing and protection. But, against all discursive, didactic, doctrinal, descriptive, and narrative prayer, and generally against all long detailed addresses to the Deity, *upon any occasion whatever*, he strenuously protests, as absurd and unreasonable, and subversive of the very end which they profess to have in view; by creating in the minds of young persons a disgust and aversion from religion and every thing connected with it, which frequently remains, fixed and insuperable, to the latest period of life.

Still farther, it is said, that whatever may be thought of public prayer and psalm-singing, it cannot be doubted that *preaching* is of the utmost importance, as a means of instructing mankind in their duty, and teaching them “how they ought
to

to walk and to please God;" and therefore, though we may not be able to perceive any great advantage arising from public worship, separately considered; yet, as it is usually accompanied by discourses calculated to impress the mind with a sense of the great importance of religious and moral practice, it is in this view entitled to our warmest encouragement. To this it may be replied, that admitting for the present the utility of preaching, till we come to treat expressly on it in the next essay—this argument will have no force, unless it can be shewn, that public worship and preaching are necessarily connected. But this is by no means the case. Nothing is so easy as to separate them. And if it be acknowledged that the former is absurd, while the latter is supposed to be useful, surely the obvious course is, to abolish the one, and to retain the other.

But "is not a regular and constant attendance on public worship, a very proper method of improving the leisure of the Sabbath; which might be dangerous if not steadily occupied in

some mode or other, and cannot be so well employed in any other way?" The Sabbath! By what authority do we prohibit the innocent and useful occupations of life on any particular day*? By what right do we enjoin idleness, the parent of vice, during a seventh portion of time? By whose command do we keep, or rather pretend to keep, the Sabbath?

"By his, who forbade the eating of swine, who instituted the passover, and appointed circumcision."

Why then do we not abstain from pork, keep the passover, and circumcise our children?

"Because we are not Jews."

For the same reason we have no concern with the Sabbath. Are we still to learn that we have

* See this subject fully discussed in Evanston's "Arguments against and for the sabbatical observance of Sunday." See also Belsham's Review of Wilberforce, Letter 12; a work in which perfect good temper, closeness of reasoning, perspicuity of arrangement, and purity of style, unite to form one of the most masterly controversial books of the age; and to place the character of the excellent author, as a gentleman, a philosopher, and a christian, above any praise which I am able to bestow.

nothing to do with Jewish institutions—that they are peculiar to that people—that they were intended by their legislator as a mark or sign of separation between them and the rest of the world—that Moses and the prophets, though full of denunciations against the people of Israel, on account of their disregard of the Sabbath, never once speak of that institution as universally obligatory; never once exhort the Gentiles to the observance of it; never once threaten them with punishment for the neglect of it—that in fact it is a merely national institution—and that we who are not Jews, are no more interested in it, than in their distinction of meats and drinks, or their new moons—and that consequently, the horror with which many pious persons contemplate the idea of *profaning the sabbath*, is a mere child of the imagination, utterly destitute of foundation in truth or reason? With us all days are equal: and were the affairs of the world conducted according to the dictates of reason, and the benevolent maxims of christianity, no day would by any class of mankind be so entirely de-

voted to labour, as not to afford leisure for self-recollection, and for intellectual and moral improvement*.

By this time, perhaps, some frequenter of public worship is ready to admit, that little good is likely to arise from it. Still, however, the influence of early prejudice prevails; and he is unwilling to discontinue a practice to which he has been so long accustomed. His mind is still haunted by a notion, that it is a *duty*. But how does this appear? Not from nature, which is totally silent upon the subject. Not from the New Testament, which has nothing in favour of it. If it be a duty at all, it must be capable of being defined. But no individual can discover, either from natural or supernatural revelation,

* Such is the force of prejudice, that the crime of Sabbath-breaking, in the estimation of some people, equals the greatest moral guilt! It is not long since, that I heard a very worthy divine, in a discourse on the exceeding sinfulness of sin, use nearly the following words: "Depend upon it, my brethren, no murderer, no adulterer, no perjured person, no liar, no thief, no *Sabbath breaker*, shall have any portion in the kingdom of God and of Christ through all eternity!" When he had proceeded thus far, he might with equal justice have added, no taylor, no shoemaker, &c.

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the place where, the manner how, or the persons in conjunction with whom, it is his duty to perform this act. Nor can it indeed be performed at all, by any reasonable man, except under very peculiar circumstances. Such a man will not believe that he is called upon by any law, natural or supernatural, to do what appears to him to be either irrational or immoral. He cannot, therefore, concur in any mode of worship which he conceives to be absurd, or of evil tendency. He must wait till he is so fortunate as to find a number of persons like-minded with himself, who are agreed, or ready to agree, in some scheme of public worship which he shall think rational and useful. Now, whether this is ever likely to happen to *any* man who *thinks for himself*, instead of resigning his understanding to the authority of custom and fashion, let the reader judge.

Lastly. It has been contended, that the idea of public prayer being unreasonable in itself, and discountenanced by Jesus Christ, is utterly

irreconcilable with the fact, of its being so generally practised by his followers. But this argument will “vanish into thin air,” if we consider, by whom, and for what reasons, the practice has been promoted and encouraged. The performance of what is called *divine service*, and the administration of *sacraments*, require a body of men, set apart for that purpose; and if they can persuade the people, as they have been too successful in attempting, that these things are of the utmost importance, and that they are only valid when under their management, and depend for all their efficacy upon passing through their sacred hands; they immediately obtain an ascendancy over their minds, and a command of their wealth, which are too valuable to be easily relinquished; and which, when acquired, they will naturally be disposed to employ every art and every argument, to extend and to perpetuate.

On the whole, it appears,—That public, stated worship is not reasonable, because it is not the worship of the heart, nor is capable of expressing the various affections and feelings of the several

veral individuals who compose a numerous assembly; it gives occasion to hypocrisy and to false notions; it is discountenanced by the New Testament; its tendency is to disguise, obscure, and corrupt, the purity, simplicity, and spirituality of real religion, as dictated by nature and confirmed by Jesus Christ: and though, as happens in other cases, its actual effect is not generally so bad as might be expected, yet it must be allowed to be considerable—That short occasional addresses to the Deity, may sometimes be offered jointly by a few persons, not only without absurdity, but with advantage. But, that the worship “in spirit and in truth” in the best sense of the words, that which is of universal concern, and of the highest importance, is that SECRET COMMUNION, which the truly pious mind never fails to hold with its Creator; which is perfectly natural, and even unavoidable; which is agreeable to reason, is productive of the happiest moral and religious effects, and is sanctioned by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, both in precept and example. The true wor-

shipper is not he “who is one outwardly;” not he who offers his stated, formal, and ceremonious homage, at Jerusalem or on mount Gerizim, in the temple, or in the conventicle: but he is the true worshipper “who is one inwardly;” and acceptable worship is of the heart, and not of the tongue, whose praise is not of man, but of God.

P A R T II.

ON RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

THAT religious and moral instruction is of the very first importance to the young, and that those who are more advanced in years are still capable of deriving great advantages from frequent attention to these subjects, are truths which will be readily assented to by every man who himself values religion and morals, and who has made any considerable progress in the study of human nature. It appears to be the immutable law of Divine Providence, that nothing valuable is to be obtained without labour. And as in the vegetable kingdom, whatever may be the fecundity of the earth, no good fruit is to be expected but in consequence of the unremitting care, and assiduous exertions of the husbandman; so in the moral world, whatever we may imagine con-

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cerning the original powers and dispositions of human nature, we cannot rationally hope for excellence of character, but in proportion as due pains have been bestowed upon the cultivation of the mind. If then it be our duty to promote the welfare of human society, and especially to secure the happiness of those individuals who are placed under our more immediate protection, we are surely called upon by the most urgent motives, to use every method in our power to "train them up in the way in which they should walk," in the reasonable hope that "when they are old they will not depart from it*."

There is then no question concerning the propriety or necessity of education. But the expediency of an enquiry concerning the *best and most effectual means* of instruction, is so obvious, that it has exercised the understandings and the pens of philosophers in all ages. The subject however is not yet exhausted; and I now propose to submit a few short observations upon it, to the judgment of the reader.

* Prov. xxii. 6.

Against very early instruction it has been objected, that its effect is to store the mind with prejudices instead of useful knowledge; and to preclude the possibility of forming an impartial judgment at a riper age. But in answer to this objection it may be said, that if admitted, it would conclude against all instruction whatever; and would leave every individual of the human race, to trace his solitary path through life, unassisted by the researches and experience of the rest of his species. All instruction whatever may be considered as operating in the way of prejudice. Every mechanic or liberal art which contributes to the comfort and convenience of life; every discovery by which science ameliorates the condition of humanity; every thing in the long and slow gradation, from untutored nature, to the most improved civilization; in a word, every thing that distinguishes the philosopher from the savage, is, and must be, received and acted upon by the generality of mankind, without the possibility of any previous enquiry concerning the reasons upon which it is founded.

These

These reasons indeed are open to subsequent investigation, and *ought by all means to be examined*. But in the first instance, to act from habit, formed by precept and example, and not from the deductions of reason, is the universal and unchangeable condition of humanity; and were a practice so absurd as that of deferring moral and religious instruction till the maturity of the pupil, to prevail, sad experience would shew, that it would then come too late. The enemy being already in possession of the field, it would be overspread with tares of idleness and vice, which no human skill would be able to eradicate *.

Dismissing

* This essay was written before the appearance of Miss Hannah More's *Strictures on Female Education*, in the beginning of whose tenth chapter there is a coincidence of ideas, and (allowing for the superior talents of the fair author) a similarity of language somewhat remarkable. I wish I could speak with approbation of *every* part of a work in which there is so much that is truly valuable; but, alas! it is unhappily disfigured by an exploded and absurd system of divinity, as irreconcilable to unprejudiced reason, as to the New Testament. Miss M. considers it as a "foundation truth" that children are not innocent beings, but "bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil dispositions;" and "the quality most important in an instructor of youth," she says, is "a strong impression

Dismissing then this extravagant objection as unworthy of an enlightened philosophy, we proceed to observe, that as the only method of fe-

impression of the corruption of our nature." The pupil, no doubt, is to be taught this "foundation truth." If so, what an excuse will it not furnish him for all irregularities of conduct! what a ready answer to every reproof of his tutor! "You tell me that I am naturally wicked. I follow my inclinations. How can you blame me for acting agreeably to nature?"—How opposite is all this to genuine Christianity! In the New Testament, young children are every where represented as free from evil dispositions, innocent, and teachable. The corrupt nature so much insisted upon, was the invention of priests in an after age, in order to magnify the importance of baptism, and consequently to increase the power and authority of the clergy. But what says our divine master, whose kingdom was not of this world? Except ye be converted *and become as little children*, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven, Matt. xviii. 3. Suffer *little children* to come unto me, for *of such* is the kingdom of heaven, Matt. xix. 13. Mark x. 14. Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a *little child* shall in no wise enter therein, Luke xviii. 17. What says an Apostle? In malice be ye *children*, 1 Cor. xiv. 20. In perfect consistency with this groundless notion, our ingenious and well intentioned author seems to have adopted the ridiculous fancy of an ancient father, who contended, that the best works of those who were not Christians were no more than *splendida peccata*, or, in the language of the thirteenth article of the Church of England, that good works "have the nature of sin." Yet with strange inconsistency, she has recourse to the histories of Greece and Rome for instances of pure morals and illustrious virtue!

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curing the opening mind from those false impressions which it will be liable to receive from the corrupt maxims and vicious practice of the world, is to pre-occupy it with just views and virtuous habits; we need not hesitate to adopt the decision of the wisest and most enlightened of mankind, who have concurred in assuring us, that a course of moral discipline ought to be entered, upon as soon as the capacity of the subject shall render it possible. That this ability to receive instruction discovers itself very early, is well known to those who are conversant with children; and it is certain that a boy of four or five years of age may be made to understand the meaning, and to feel the importance, of the leading truths in morals and religion, in a degree that would be absolutely incredible without experiment. During the years of childhood we acquire those ideas and habits which are to influence the whole of our existence; and on the improvement or neglect of this early period of life, this precious seed time of the mind, depends, for the most part, the happiness or misery of the future man.

By

By whom then is this salutary instruction to be afforded to the infant mind? Nature, faithful Nature, instantly dictates the reply. By those to whom the great author of our being, the all-wise contriver and governor of the eternal system, has immediately intrusted it. By PARENTS, the natural guardians of the lives, the health, the fortunes, and the morals of the rising generation.

That the business of moral discipline properly belongs to parents, is evident from hence, that they only can be supposed to feel that interest in the improvement of their pupils, which is essential to complete success in this important work. The nearest and most necessary connexion between individuals of the human race is that of families; consisting of the relation of husband and wife, parent and child. These little societies are the sources of whatever is delightful and consoling to human nature; and on the good government of these depends, under Providence, the preservation of order, morality, religion, in a word, of all.

all that is valuable to mankind *. Other teachers, indeed, may from a sense of duty be stimulated to exertions at once honourable to themselves and beneficial to those under their care; but this principle is, in general, too cold to produce those vigorous and persevering efforts which are the natural fruit of parental affection. Other teachers are liable to be disheartened by dulness, or disgusted by obstinacy: but the zeal of the parent

* If however we give credit to the advocates for the perpetuation of ignorance and slavery, it is from the civil and ecclesiastical powers, that have kindly undertaken to manage the affairs of nations, that we derive all our blessings. Kings and priests, they assure us, are not only wise and good themselves, but moreover the cause of all that is wise and good in others; and from the abolition of these orders, which many think seems to be fast approaching, they predict the most fatal consequences. This doctrine, however, labours under the misfortune of being contradicted by universal history. Kings and priests have in all ages been the great disturbers of the world; and to their lust of dominion is to be ascribed the far greater part of the evils which have afflicted mankind. When I speak of *families*, therefore, as sources of happiness, I by no means intend *Royal families*; and if I mention *FATHERS*, as the proper guides and instructors of youth, I must not be understood to include *Right Rev. FATHERS in God*. Not a word of this note however applies to our own most gracious sovereign, or to his illustrious house, of whom, both from my own inclination, as well as *in obedience to Act of Parliament*, I always wish to speak and to think with respect.

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never cools; his hope never dies. He still flatters himself that his labours will be finally successful. And as “the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it *,” so the fond parent, under circumstances of difficulty and discouragement, which would drive to despair any less interested teacher, is supported by the cheering hope, that he shall one day enjoy the reward of his labours, in the wisdom and virtue of his son.

Nor is it natural affection alone, that renders parents the proper guardians and instructors of their offspring. The sense of duty, which we just now mentioned, is more powerful in them than it can be supposed to be in any other class of mankind.

The father of a family is invested with a trust, the importance of which he cannot estimate too highly; and is under an obligation, from which nothing can release him, to devote all his powers, corporeal and mental, principally to one great object; namely, to the gradual advancement in wis-

* James v. 7.

dom and virtue, and consequently in happiness, of those beings whom, by the appointment of Heaven, he has been instrumental in introducing into the world. It is his indispensable duty, not only to provide them, or to enable them to provide themselves, with things needful for the body; but, which is of infinitely greater importance, to furnish their minds with such principles, as may enable them to support an upright and consistent conduct, and to bear an useful and honourable part in the transactions of this unstable scene. I say, *to act well here*. I know that much has been said about preparation for eternity; and in this view, great stress has been laid, *for a very obvious reason*, already noticed, on the efficacy of sacraments and ceremonial observances. But if, agreeably to the general expectation of mankind in all ages, there be an *hereafter*, no unprejudiced man can doubt, that whatever dignifies and ennobles human nature, and renders it in a great measure superior to the chances and changes of mortality, must be the only possible preparation, for

for the untried and unknown employments of the future and invifible world.

This imperious duty, the reflecting father cannot but ftrongly feel. “Heaven,” he will fay, looking upon his helpless infant, “has committed to my charge this tender plant, to be reared to maturity; and if through my fupinenefs it wither and die, or living, produce not its proper fruit, how fhall I render up my account! If, through my criminal negligence, this rational and moral being fail to attain that which is the perfection of its nature, and the end of its creation, WISDOM, VIRTUE, and HAPPINESS, furely Heaven will require it at my hands! Necessity is laid upon me; Woe is unto me, if I shrink from this important task. I fee my duty, and I will perform it. My whole foul fhall engage in the work; and though it is not in me to command fuccefs, I am determined to deferve it*.”

From thefe confiderations, if we miftake not,

* 'Tis not in mortals to command fuccefs,

But we'll do more, Sempronius—we'll deferve it.

ADDISON'S CATO.

the enquiring mind will be irresistibly led to condemn the monstrous absurdity of that system, which would divest parents of the exercise of their natural right to educate their offspring, and transfer it to the state; agreeably to the practice of the celebrated Spartans, and some other nations. In Sparta indeed, where public glory, and not private happiness, was the object of the government, where the state seemed not to be made for men, but men for the state, this practice might be very consistent. It was necessary that individuals should be formed and trained to the views and ends of the body politic. But if there be a nation upon earth in which liberty and equality are first principles; in which the welfare of all the members of the society, without preference and without exception, is the great end of the institution—in such a nation one might hope, that instead of *legal* truth and *national* instruction, every man would be secured in that perfect and unbounded liberty of educating his offspring, which is not only his original and natural right, but without which there can be no rational hope
of

of any considerable and substantial improvement in human affairs.

It is true that hitherto almost all governments have, more or less, interfered with the sacred right of education. But what does this prove, except that hitherto, there has existed no such thing as a perfectly rational government in the world? If this be doubted, and if any still feel inclined to adopt the unnatural opinion, that the business of religious education is rather a national than a private concern, a little attention to the effect of this interference, may serve to correct the mistake.

A candid and faithful history of religious institutions, is a grand desideratum in literature; and its effect would infallibly be, to excite in the mind of the liberal enquirer, either contempt or indignation, against every sect and party, without exception. In order to appreciate the value of ecclesiastical establishments, we must recollect, that to the tyranny of priests we are indebted, for the slow progress of truth, in religion, in philosophy, and in civil government: their

dread of innovation, and their earnest solicitude to perpetuate the empire of ignorance and superstition, having uniformly excited them to oppose every generous attempt to promote the diffusion of knowledge amongst mankind. That *alliance between church and state*, which has almost every where been formed for the vile purpose of enslaving the world, has produced “acts for the uniformity of worship,” and “articles for the taking away diversity of opinion, and establishing one consent touching true religion:” and it has enabled those who have arrogated to themselves, the right of directing the consciences of the rest of mankind, to dictate what opinions are to be received or rejected, and what actions are to be performed or avoided; and to enforce those dictates, not only by the denunciation of eternal damnation to the disobedient, which, if it were all, would perhaps be pretty generally disregarded; but also by that which comes nearer to every man’s feelings, by the terror of every species of temporal punishment; by fines, confiscations, imprisonments, and death itself. Nor has it been
forgotten

forgotten in the midst of this “ torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind*” of holy zeal for the salvation of immortal souls, to recommend in the most glowing and animated language of approbation, that first of all virtues, that effectual covering for the multitude of sins, that expiatory sacrifice of sovereign efficacy, a liberal contribution of the good things of this life, towards supporting the honour and dignity of holy church ! In this article the clergy of every sect, Heathen, Jewish, Christian, and Mahometan are unanimous; and it is in the steady and uniform zeal with which this essential doctrine has been enforced, that we are furnished with the clearest proof of the truth of that trite observation, that “ priests of all religions are the same.”

Little however is done, or even attempted, by the national clergy in any part of the world, towards checking the progress of immorality ; and it is notorious, that in this country, the advantage derived to the cause of virtue from the labours of

* Shakspeare's Hamlet.

these spiritual pastors and teachers, is altogether disproportionate to the enormous expence of the institution. Scarcely any attention whatever is paid to that most important of all objects, the initiation of the young and ignorant, in the elements of religion and morality. The majority of the people do not frequent, either the authorised places of public instruction, or any other; and if they are withheld from attendance by a notion, that little advantage is to be derived from it, the opinion is rendered plausible, by observing the conduct of those whose attendance is the most regular.

This point deserves some consideration; because public preaching, or the delivery of formal discourses, as is the practice of the clergy, in the places appropriated to what is called public worship, is highly extolled, as the most important mode of conveying religious and moral instruction.

It is true indeed that, in general, the warmest advocates for this practice have been divines; who, though it would be extremely uncandid to suggest

suggest that they are always governed by interested motives, may however, I think, very fairly be supposed to be liable to some portion of that professional bias, which is well known to prompt even the best and most enlightened of mankind, to overrate the value of those employments in which themselves are engaged *. From divines, therefore, no impartial opinion upon the subject can be expected. We shall do well to weigh their arguments; but we must not implicitly trust to their assertions. We must carefully examine the subject for ourselves. The importance of the enquiry is sufficiently evident from this

* One learned professor goes so far as to assert, that were public worship and public instruction interrupted for a considerable time, men would lose all sense of religion, run wild, prey upon one another, and *soon* become little better than the savages. *Credat Judacus!* Leechman's Serm. Vol. I. Serm. X. Had this good man been a dancing-master instead of a divine, he might have *imagined*, but it would not have been in his way to *write*, that were dancing schools discontinued, men would lose their erect posture, go on all fours, and soon become little better than the Orang-Outang. In the vast empire of China, however, there is neither state-religion, nor public instruction; yet the conduct of the people is more orderly and moral than that of Europeans. Whether there are any dancing-masters, I know not.

single consideration; that the utility of preaching, is made an argument for the necessity of an order of men, which, if it cannot be proved to be highly serviceable, ought, for many reasons besides the vast expence of supporting it, to be wholly laid aside *. Let us then, as fairly as we can, for in vain shall we hope to be entirely emancipated from prejudice, endeavour to estimate the value of this practice.

Were we to indulge in conjecture on the probable advantages of preaching, before enquiry into its actual effect, our expectation would not be much raised by observing, in what manner the office of the ministry is usually acquired.

The emoluments of a richly endowed church, like that of England, are considered as a species of property; and are purchased, like other property, as a provision for children. When young men, therefore, receive ordination, and subscribe their *unfeigned assent and consent* to articles which

* Voltaire, somewhere remarks, in his lively way—"If England had seventy thousand priests, instead of seventy thousand sailors, what a different figure would she make in Europe!"

they *do not believe*, for this reason only, that the property which they are destined to enjoy, cannot be held upon any other terms, is it to be expected that they will pay any greater attention to the duties attached to the sacred character, than what is exacted from them by law? Will they not, on the contrary, be heartily disposed to consider those duties, as so many burthens and incumbrances, which it is their business to make as light as possible? Can it be supposed that they will make any sacrifice of those fashionable, though immoral, pursuits and amusements to which they think themselves by their fortune entitled, in order to “give themselves wholly” to religion, to “do the work of an evangelist,” to be “examples of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity *?” Are genuine religion and sound morals likely to derive much support from those flimsy discourses which, for the sake of decency, they occasionally take the trouble to deliver? Is

* 1 Tim. iv. 12.

the great work of reformation to be expected from such hands?

With respect to the higher offices of religion, by which she is enabled to “lift her mitred front in courts and parliaments *;” not to mention that these distinctions are too often obtained by the most abject flattery of the great, or the most servile compliance with the corrupt politics of a court; it is well known, that the enjoyment of them is rarely found to consist with much anxiety for instruction, either public or private. To be “apt to teach †,” whatever might be the case in the age of primitive christianity, is as little the characteristic of modern bishops, as of any class of men whatever. If they teach any thing, it is the wholesome doctrine of submission to whatever our ecclesiastical or civil governors shall be pleased to enjoin.

The clergy among the Dissenters are upon a very different footing. That profound respect,

* Burke on the French Revolution. † 2 Tim. ii. 24.

which

which was formerly paid to them by their adherents, has been long decreasing; and few of them, in the present day, possess any considerable portion of that authority which is so flattering to the pride of human nature. Nor are there any temptations held out to avarice or ambition, from honours or emoluments. The salary of the most fortunate dissenting minister, will scarcely equal that of a reputable merchant's clerk; while the stipend of others is inferior to the wages of a bricklayer's labourer; and their condition, upon the whole, not more enviable than that of the poorest Welch curate. Still, however, various causes concur to furnish a succession of ministers. Sometimes, the mistaken piety of a parent determines the fate of his unfortunate son, and sometimes, his vanity. For the minister, though often obliged to "bear the proud man's contumely," and to "duck his learned pate to the golden fool," is always, in some sort, considered as a gentleman. In a few instances it has happened, that a lad at school, having made an extraordinary proficiency in the classics, has for that reason

reason alone been devoted to the sacred office : as if an unfortunate disposition to learn languages could possibly merit so severe a punishment, as the being condemned to subsist for life, upon forty pounds a year. Thus, from the operation of various circumstances, are boys selected, sometimes before their talents or dispositions can be known, and sometimes in defiance of every indication of nature, to be educated for the ministry.

After having finished their preparatory studies, their object is, to be chosen by some church or congregation, as pastor, or assistant preacher. In this situation, what is their business? Is it to assist their hearers in their enquiries after truth? No such thing! It is to maintain a system of opinions which is the standard of orthodoxy in that particular connexion. In order to this, it is expected, that at a certain ceremony called ordination, to which many superstitious ideas are usually annexed, they should make a full confession and declaration, of whatever they believe, or disbelieve. In the performance of this duty, they are carefully watched by every old woman
of

of both sexes in the congregation; and the probable consequence of any considerable departure from the faith, is either a division of the society, or the rejection of the minister*.

Shall we then wonder that they often enter upon the exercise of their profession with a heavy heart;—that they perform the supposed duties of it without spirit or energy, and with little profit to the hearers;—that many awkwardly endeavour to conceal their sentiments, or to accommodate them to the taste of their employers;—or that in an age which begins to think for itself, and to

* This tyranny is not universal. The public worship at the chapel in Essex-street, for instance, has little similarity to the general state of things amongst the dissenters. Its truly apostolic founder seems to have been as perfectly unfettered by creeds and systems as any of the philosophers of antiquity. Like them he opened his school of morals and religion, and invited the world to attend his lectures. Those who were so happy as to accept the invitation, listened to discourses which, for their importance, might have claimed the attention of a Locke or a Newton, and for their simplicity might have been addressed to children. His successor too has great merit. Yet this institution will degenerate. The trustees of the building will at length become trustees of the faith; and future ministers will be chosen, as in other dissenting congregations, to teach whatever they, in their wisdom or their ignorance, shall have pre-ordained to be taught.

think

think freely, not a few should dare to break the fetters of prejudice, and to escape from a situation which presents so little prospect of either profit, honour, or usefulness?

But, whatever may be the character or situation of the ministers of this or that denomination, or however objectionable the particular constitution of any ecclesiastical establishment, still it is triumphantly insisted upon, that the moral and religious conduct of those who statedly attend upon public instruction, is a sufficient proof of its utility. A practice, it is said, which is followed by such happy consequences must be highly deserving of encouragement; and “the
“ advantage of having the most salutary instruc-
“ tions on every part of human duty enforced
“ by the most powerful considerations, laid be-
“ fore whole assemblies at once,” is manifest and undeniable.

This triumph, however, if we mistake not, is premature.

Should we even admit, what may perhaps be true, that the delivery of public lectures to large
audiences

audiences had its uses, and was entitled to encouragement, in an age when books were scarce and costly, and learning was confined to a very small number of persons; it would by no means follow, that this practice ought still to be continued. It must always have had its inconveniences and its dangers. Public orations are easily capable of being made the instruments of incalculable mischief. They may be directed to inflame the imagination, without enlightening the mind; to rouse the passions, without informing the judgment. A more dangerous character can hardly be imagined than an eloquent ecclesiastic, surrounded by an ignorant multitude, who have been taught to consider him as an oracle. It must always therefore have been desirable, that this mode of instruction should be superseded, by something more certain in its effect, and less liable to be abused.

The INVENTION OF PRINTING has supplied this desideratum. By means of this noblest of the mechanic arts, books are so easily multiplied, as to be within the reach of the mass of mankind; and

reading will, at no great distance of time, be universal. The advantages of this method of acquiring knowledge, and its superiority to oral instruction, are so manifest, as scarcely to need being pointed out. The lecture of the public orator is extremely liable to be misunderstood, and is not easily retained; but what is written remains. He who is in possession of a book, may, after having read and considered it, consult it again and again, and return to it at any distance of time for fresh instruction. In this way he is enabled calmly to contemplate the subject of his enquiry in every possible point of view; to detect the various errors into which he may inadvertently or hastily have fallen; to review even his own latest decisions, and to correct his maturest judgment by the discoveries of others. The progress of truth, therefore, is much more likely to be assisted by books, than by *viva voce* discourses: and if I were called upon to mention that event in history which is, without exception, and beyond all comparison, most interesting to mankind, I should not hesitate to name the IN-

VENTION

VENTION OF PRINTING. It is this omnipotent engine which is destined to move the world ; to renovate the face of nature ; to change the aspect of human affairs. The powers that be, have indeed taken alarm at its effects ; and in more than one country of Europe, violent efforts are even now making to annihilate its existence, or to confine its operations. But no combination of partial interests shall be able to arrest its wonder-working progress, or to extinguish that light which it has already diffused over the earth. It will shine more and more unto the perfect day. Every cloud of ignorance, error, and superstition, shall at length vanish before it ; and human nature, having attained a maturity, physical, intellectual, and moral, hitherto unknown, shall acknowledge that, under Providence, it is indebted for its noblest improvements, its sublimest discoveries, and its sweetest enjoyments, to the INVENTION OF PRINTING.

Should we farther admit, for the sake of argument, and it is only in this view that it can be admitted, that the conduct of stated hearers is in

general exemplary, still it remains to be proved, that this good conduct is the effect of preaching. No error is more common than to confound causes and effects, and to mistake the one for the other.

A conscientious man will steadily conform to whatever he conceives to be his *duty*, and avoid the contrary. Whether this belief be the effect of free enquiry, or of early prejudice; whether he be a philosopher or a bigot, a Gentoo or a Christian, a disciple of Confucius or of Swedenborg, it is still the same. As a man of principle, his practice will be uniformly governed by his sense of right and wrong. And if he have been told from his youth, that he ought to attend upon religious ordinances, if not for his own sake, yet as an example to others, his attendance will infallibly be regular and punctual, even though, instead of deriving any benefit from it, he should find it, as must often be the case, a severe trial of his patience. It is indeed not easy to conceive, how any man of sense can prevail upon himself regularly to endure the extreme dullness and ab-

furdity of some of our pulpits, who has not had the misfortune to be taught in early life, that he is thereby *performing a duty*, which he cannot omit without incurring the displeasure of Heaven. But under the influence of this idea, the severest penance may be cheerfully supported; and thus a regular attendance upon sermons and prayers may be the *effect*, and not the *cause*, of a virtuous disposition*.

Is

* I know not how it happens, but it is a fact, that many of our pulpit orators offer to their adult hearers such miserable trash as they would be perfectly ashamed to address to children. Useless and unintelligible jargon, it seems, will do for men and women, but when we instruct children, we must talk common sense—I remember, many years ago, being led by curiosity to a chapel occupied by the Moravian brethren in Fetter-lane. In the whole course of the service, consisting of prayer, singing, and preaching, little occurred from which I could derive either pleasure or profit. Almost every thing that was not absolutely incomprehensible, appeared to me highly absurd. On the breaking up of the assembly a few persons remained; and, wishing to see and hear every thing, I remained also. The preacher descended from the pulpit, and seating himself at a small table, near which were collected twenty or thirty children, from five to ten years of age, he addressed them on the leading points of natural and supernatural religion, in a short discourse, so simple, familiar, and intelligible in point of style, and so rational and important as to the matter; in a word, so completely the reverse of every thing I had

Is it, however, in fact, true, that the moral conduct of those who attend upon public instruction, is so much superior to that of the rest of the world, as they would have us believe? This point ought not to be hastily conceded. Do we find nothing of envy, hatred, malice, or uncharitableness, amongst the members of what are called christian churches? Is there nothing like spiritual pride, or hypocrisy, in any of these societies? To speak plainly, are they not the very hot-beds in which those vices are infallibly produced? It is perhaps true, that the discipline of the sectaries may be some restraint upon the members of their little congregations, so far as relates to the more gross and open instances of immorality; but who, that has any acquaintance with the management of parishes, ever perceived, that the most regular attendance upon the religious ordinances of the church of England, had any effect towards preventing a church-

been hearing for near two hours, as to excite in my mind the utmost surprise and astonishment! Why could not he have talked thus sensibly to the fathers and mothers?

warden

warden or an overseer, to say nothing of the parson or the clerk, from enjoying the obscene toast, vociferating the profane oath, or getting drunk at a visitation dinner? On the other hand, have we not often occasion to notice the warmest benevolence, and the most irreproachable integrity, in those who profess no attachment to external and ceremonious observances, and who consider the priestly office as entirely superfluous?

Nothing in fact can be more clearly evident, than that those good dispositions which, wherever they exist, contribute so much to the comfort of social life, are the fruit, not of pulpit oratory, but of that patient and unremitting attention to reproof and exhortation, which is peculiar to the natural and endearing connexion of private families. Public oratory has nothing in its nature suitable to this end. It may indeed, sometimes, produce astonishing effects, by rousing the passions, or swaying the judgment of the multitude, in favour of any object of the moment, whether good or bad, of which very memorable instances are recorded in history; but it

is utterly incapable of implanting in the mind, the seeds of moral sentiment; of instilling the first principles of generous and manly conduct; or of producing that steady and uniform character of virtue, which, happily for the world, is so often the effect of a long-continued course of family discipline.

It is not denied, that hitherto the greater number of serious christians have been frequenters of public worship, and public instruction. But the developement of error and superstition is slow and gradual. There was a time when almost all christians believed the doctrine of transubstantiation, now so justly exploded. As free enquiry proceeds—and no violence will be able to suppress it—it may come to pass, that religious ceremonies and professional discourses shall be no more valued by the thinking part of mankind, nor have any more connexion with virtuous conduct, than extreme unction, or papal absolution, have at present.

This way of arguing from the supposed effects of opinions, must indeed be confessed to open a
door

door to uncandid suggestion, and fallacious inference. It is easy to say, "I am holier than thou;" but mere confident assertion, can furnish no proof of any thing, but the pride or the impudence of him who resorts to it; and it would be for the honour of all religious persuasions, to pay more regard to the apostolical advice, "not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think," instead of indulging that party spirit, which prompts men to view with contempt, or hatred, the characters and persons of those whom they choose to call their adversaries *.—Thus much, however, may, I think, be safely affirmed—that public instruction and public worship, considered as expedients for diffusing religious knowledge and promoting moral practice, have completely failed. Nor is it probable, that if these institutions were utterly unknown, there would exist more vice and profligacy of

* This however is the argument adopted by Andrew Fuller in his celebrated treatise entitled *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems compared*. We Calvinists are better men than you Arians and Socinians: therefore Calvinism is the truth! Very conclusive, no doubt, if we admit the premises; and for these, we have the modest gentleman's own word.

every kind, public and private, or less of the peaceable and humble spirit of christianity, than are now to be found in this country, where religion, or rather what is commonly but undeservedly called religion, is supported at an annual expence of at least five millions sterling.

That religion and morals were ever the real objects of these institutions, is indeed extremely questionable. It is certain in many instances, and highly credible in others, that those who have been most active in promoting the establishment of church authority, have regarded it merely as an engine of state, happily adapted to curb the licentiousness of the people, and to strengthen the hands of government. Nor have they ever been disappointed, except when the interest of the church has been imprudently neglected. While kings have manifested a disposition to be “nursing fathers” and queens “nursing mothers” to the church, a great majority of the sacred order have always been ready on their part, without scruple to disseminate, and to “enforce by the most *powerful* considerations,” whatever doctrines were

were understood to be agreeable to the monarch. In the course of this dishonourable employment every moral precept of christianity has been trodden under foot, by those who have claimed to be the depositaries of its sacred mysteries; and the pretended advocates of order, morality, and religion, by the support they have afforded to tyranny, and the opposition they have made to the progress of knowledge, have, in reality, been the greatest enemies of all the three.

Very far is it from my intention to assert, that this description applies universally to every minister of religion. There are, no doubt, many illustrious exceptions; some of whom, I have the honour to count amongst the number of my friends. It is, however, the direct tendency of the profession to produce this character; and it is a fact, that divines, for the most part, whether in or out of the establishment, have ever been unfriendly to *real* liberty; those of the favoured faction, by their domineering temper, and those of the oppressed or tolerated sects, by their abject and cringing servility, having eminently contributed

to depress the spirit of freedom, and to check the progress of human intellect. The latter have incurred a double disgrace; for while, on the one hand, they have meanly submitted to flatter the power which permitted them to exist, they have, on the other, attempted to exercise the same spiritual tyranny over their tame adherents, which they condemned in their triumphant adversaries.

Upon the whole, if wisdom may be collected from experience, if we may presume to judge of the future from the past, we are abundantly warranted in predicting, that while mankind are influenced by that system which supposes it necessary for the people to be instructed in their religious and moral obligations, by persons claiming a divine commission, and expecting to be gratified with ample salaries and possessions, as the reward of their supposed services; in a word, while religion continues to be a trade, and there are priests who can say, "by this craft we have our wealth," so long will the prevalence of genuine liberty and pure religion be utterly hopeless.

To

TO DOMESTIC INSTRUCTION then, aided by the noble art of printing, we must look for the cultivation of the best principles of the human mind. And though the conduct of the priesthood in all ages, if any credit be due to history, cannot but have had the most unhappy influence in counteracting and weakening its effect; yet still to domestic instruction we are chiefly indebted, for whatever of excellence exists in the human character. That much of excellence *does* exist, and that still more is *capable* of existing, are positions which can hardly be doubted by any but the wildest enthusiast. But perfection is only to be attained by slow and gradual advances; and the moral improvement of our race cannot be expected to make any considerable progress, till superstition shall have lost its hold on the human mind; till all pretences to sacredness of character shall be laid aside; till knowledge shall be generally diffused, and EVERY PARENT SHALL BE THE INSTRUCTOR OF HIS OWN OFFSPRING.

P A R T III.

ON CHRISTIANITY AS A SUPERNATURAL
COMMUNICATION.

OF the great subjects of human enquiry, Religion, if it have any foundation at all, must be the most important. No question more interesting to an intelligent being can be asked, than the following—What are my obligations, considered as the subject of a moral governor, and the expectant of an endless life? Nor can any researches be more worthy of our rational powers, than such as relate to so glorious an expectation. Whatever promises to afford any additional light on this momentous subject, excites our curiosity; and if the communication professes to be supernatural, it immediately claims our most attentive regard.

To supernatural authority the pretensions have
been

been numerous; but it is certain that they have not been all valid, nor equally successful. In this quarter of the world, christianity, being generally received, and the profession of it enforced by law, would on that account, if on no other, be entitled to our principal attention. It is not, however, agreed in what it consists. A very great variety of representations of its nature and importance have been given, by the different sects and parties of its professors.

Some say it is founded on an event called, the fall of man; that is, a transgression of the first created man, whom they represent as the covenant head of his future race, and as having, by a single act of disobedience, entailed everlasting misery on himself and all his posterity; which consequence they say would certainly have taken place, had not a very benevolent being, whom they call the second person in the Trinity, and the creator of all worlds, condescended to be born of a woman, and to suffer death, in order to appease the wrath, or satisfy the justice, of the first person in this Trinity, who is represented as
 otherwise,

otherwise, relentless and implacable*. A great majority of the abettors of this system hold, that while on earth he appointed certain authoritative teachers of his doctrine, who ordained others in succession down to this day, whose decrees on the subject of religion are binding upon the people wherever christianity is received †.

Other representations of christianity have been given, in infinite variety. Only one more shall be here noticed; namely, that which speaks of Jesus as a mere human being, but distinguished

* The pious Dr. Watts appears to have considered it as the glory of our holy religion, that it contains more of the *marvellous* than the heathen mythology, or the tales of knight-errantry. "There is nothing amongst all the ancient *fables* or later "*romances*," says he, "that have two such *extremes* united in "them, as the eternal God becoming an infant of days; the "possessor of the palace of heaven laid to sleep in a manger; "the holy Jesus, who knew no sin, bearing the sins of men in "his body on the tree; agonies of sorrow loading the soul of "him who was God over all, blessed for ever; and the sovereign of life stretching his arms on a cross, bleeding, and "expiring." WATTS. Preface to Lyric Poems.

These he thinks are admirable subjects for poetry, which delights in *strange things*! A more severe satire on christianity was never pronounced by its bitterest enemy!

† The church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith. Art. 20, of the church of England.

from

from the whole race by larger supernatural communications than had ever before been afforded to any man; by virtue of which he became the legislator of a new dispensation, and the destined judge of all mankind at the day of final retribution. In addition to which, it has of late been strongly insisted upon, and perhaps only of late, by any persons calling themselves christians, that natural religion affords no intimation of a future life, and that we are indebted for all our information on this subject to the christian doctrine of a resurrection from the dead *.

Nor are the professors of christianity less divided on the subject of the proper evidences of its

* This appears to be a fundamental article in the system of that great ornament of human nature, the venerable Dr. Priestley. It would be endless to note the passages of his voluminous writings, in which the doctrine is asserted, or implied. He is consequently obliged to maintain, without the least shadow of proof, and, so far as I can perceive, in defiance of every thing that can be called probability, that the belief of a future state, amongst the ancient heathens, must, somehow or other, have been derived by *tradition* from the immediate descendants of Noah; yet the Jews, judging from their own history, appear to have been less acquainted with it than any other nation of antiquity.

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truth, than concerning its nature and importance. By vast numbers it is held, that the authority of the CHURCH above mentioned, which they say has subsisted in a succession of bishops from the times of the apostles, is our proper and sufficient warrant for the reception of christianity in general, as well as our only safe guide with respect to every particular tenet and opinion—while others no less confidently maintain, that we must take both the evidence and the doctrines of our religion from the books of the New Testament; and that the histories therein contained of MIRACLES said to have been performed by the first promulgators of christianity, afford an adequate ground and reason to all succeeding ages, for the acknowledgment of the divine mission of Jesus, and for submission to his authority.

The examination of the system which refers the credibility of the christian religion, and the decision of all controversies concerning it, to church authority, is not directly intended in the present essay; the principal object of which is, to enquire in as short a compass as possible, or rather to lead
the

the reader to enquire, into the nature and importance of miraculous evidence.

With this view, I shall simply state the substance of a late conversation on the subject with a very intelligent friend; and, without a single additional remark, shall leave it to the consideration of the candid reader.

We had been hearing an elaborate discourse on the resurrection of Jesus; in which the preacher insisted strongly on the indubitable *certainty* of the fact, and on the *truth* of the doctrines of christianity as a direct and necessary *consequence*. We both admired the ingenuity of the orator, and had no reason to distrust his honesty; but we were, neither of us, completely satisfied with his reasoning: and some hints which I threw out to this effect, drew from my friend the following observations, which I thought of sufficient importance to commit to writing.

“ That a miracle, cannot even to the immediate
 “ spectator, prove any doctrine to be *true*, which
 “ is already by other evidence known to be *false*,

“ is clear, not only because no position can be
“ true and false at the same time; but also, be-
“ cause in this case, it would be much more pro-
“ bable, that the performer had ingeniously con-
“ trived to deceive the eyes of the spectator, than
“ that the one GOD had furnished him with the
“ power to work a real miracle, for the mere
“ purpose of confounding and perplexing the un-
“ derstandings of his creatures. This will be still
“ more strikingly evident if the doctrine in ques-
“ tion be of a moral nature. Let us suppose, for
“ instance, an attempt to prove that envy, ha-
“ tred, and malice, are, in their nature and con-
“ sequences, preferable to candour and benevo-
“ lence; and that something like a miracle
“ should be wrought in support of it—Would
“ not every understanding revolt at the absur-
“ dity; and would not the pretended miracle be
“ instantly rejected as an imposture?

“ On the other hand, to produce the evidence
“ of miracles in proof of that which is already
“ sufficiently known and understood, is mani-
“ festly superfluous. What, for example, could
“ a miracle

“a miracle do towards proving that parents ought take care of their young children, or that children ought to obey their parents; duties which, arising immediately out of the relative situation of the parties, are clear and obvious by the light of nature? Or if the object be to inculcate on society the love of truth, as more conducive to general happiness than deceit and falsehood, how can it be imagined that so plain a doctrine can be made plainer by the exhibition of any miracle*?”

" If

* How divinely does Cicero express himself to this purpose !
Est quidem vera lex, RECTA RATIO, naturæ congruens, diffusa
in omnes, constans, sempiterna ; quæ vocet ad officium jubendo,
vetando a fraude deterreat ; quæ tamen nec probos frustra
jубet aut vetat, nec improbos jubendo aut vetando movet.
Huic legi nec obrogari fas est, neque derogari ex hac aliquid
licet, neque tota abrogari potest. Nec vero aut per senatum
aut per populum solvi hac lege possumus. Neque est quæren-
dus explanator, aut interpret ejus alius. Nec erit alia lex Ro-
mæ, alia Athenis ; alia nunc, alia posthac ; sed et omnes gen-
tes, et omni tempore, una lex, et sempiterna et immortalis con-
tinebit. Unusque erit communis quasi magister et imperator
omnium, Deus ille, legis hujus inventor, deceptor, lator ;
cui non parebit, ipse se fugiet, ac naturam hominis asperna-
bitur : atque hoc ipso luet maximas pœnas, etiam si cætera
supplicia, quæ putantur, effugerit. FRAG. DE REPUB. Lib. iii.

F 3 Invariable,

“ If this be the case with respect to the immediate spectator, it seems not easy to imagine what can be the direct use of a miracle to one who has no personal knowledge of its reality, but derives all his information concerning it from the report of others. Let us suppose such a man to be told, that two thousand years ago, a person professing to be divinely inspired had taught the doctrine of an universal Providence; and had supported his pretensions, and confirmed his

invariable, eternal; which invites men to duty by precepts, and deters them from inquiry by prohibitions; and which never commands or prohibits the virtuous in vain, though the wicked are unmoved by menaces or injunctions. Of this law nothing can be changed or altered; nor can the whole, or any part of it, be repealed or cancelled. No authority, either of the senate or the people, can release men from its obligation. It is so plain as to need no commentator or interpreter. Nor is it one law at Rome, another at Athens; one at this time, another hereafter; but the same eternal and immortal law must bind all nations and all ages, under the controul of one presiding and directing power, even God himself, by whom this law was contrived, adjusted, and established; to which whoever refuses obedience must fly from himself, and cast off the nature of a man; and this he cannot do without suffering the severest tortures, though he should escape those punishments which are commonly believed,

“ teachings,

“ teachings, by a display of miraculous power—
 “ Would it be reasonable for him to engage in a
 “ tedious, and perhaps finally unsuccessful en-
 “ quiry, concerning the reality of this person’s
 “ divine mission; to examine the miracles re-
 “ corded in history, and the alledged circumstance
 “ of their having been wrought in confirmation
 “ of this particular doctrine; to undertake all
 “ this labour, with a view—to what? to obtain
 “ satisfaction concerning a doctrine, the truth
 “ of which may at any time be shewn by a few
 “ plain arguments! Or should the matter in
 “ question be less simple and obvious than that
 “ above mentioned; should even the process of
 “ enquiry, upon the principles of reason, have its
 “ difficulties, and the result be somewhat uncer-
 “ tain; still, surely, in no case, can either the
 “ difficulty or uncertainty be so great as that
 “ which attends the investigation of ancient
 “ writings, in order, if possible, to ascertain
 “ their genuineness, authenticity, and meaning,
 “ and the truth of the facts recorded in them;

“ than which no enquiry can be more tedious
“ and intricate, and, for the most part, no labour
“ more fruitless and unprofitable. In all cases,
“ therefore, in which human nature can feel an
“ interest, would it not be much more easy to
“ learn the truth, independently of the miracle,
“ than to arrive at *absolute certainty* concerning
“ the miracle, in order to prove the doctrine?
“ I say absolute certainty, because nothing short
“ of this can be of any use in the case we are
“ considering. The history of a miracle which
“ *may be either true or false*, may afford some
“ amusement, and even some instruction; but
“ cannot without absurdity be admitted as evi-
“ dence of the truth of any doctrine, since it can-
“ not communicate that *certainty* which it does
“ not possess.”

Here, though I love to hear my friend talk, I could no longer forbear to interrupt him.—“ If this be the case,” said I; “ if histories of miracles alledged to have been wrought in ancient times, those of the Gospel for example, must not be
considered

considered as proofs of its doctrines, what have we to do with them? Why not reject them altogether?"

"This is the very point to which I was coming," replied my friend; "and I think the answer to your question is not difficult."—

"That the miraculous facts, which are said to have accompanied the first preaching of christianity, *are not of any great direct importance to us* at this day, does indeed follow from what I have been saying; but that they ought, therefore, to be utterly rejected as *false*, is so far from being a legitimate consequence of our reasoning, that, on the contrary, I have no hesitation in asserting, that the less we feel ourselves interested in the facts recorded, the more easily may we acquiesce in the truth of the narration.

"We all believe many things, of which we neither have, nor can have, any absolute certainty. This, indeed, is the case of universal history. When I read in an ancient writer, it matters not whether poet or historian, that the Greeks
waged

“waged a ten years war against Troy; having
“no possible motive to dispute the fact, I admit
“it without hesitation. But if any man could
“persuade me, that my eternal salvation were
“depending upon its truth, he would, at the
“same time, fill my mind with doubt and anx-
“iety. I should fly for relief to the perusal of
“every thing that has been written concerning
“this famous transaction, but should probably
“never obtain it, so long as I should continue to
“imagine the subject to be of great importance
“to me. If once, however, I should be so hap-
“py as to discard this groundless notion, I should
“recover my wonted tranquillity, and should be-
“lieve the story.

“In like manner, the miraculous facts record-
“ed in the Gospel may be received as history,
“although, not being attended with indisputable
“certainty, they cannot be considered as prov-
“ing the truth of doctrines with which they do
“not appear to have any necessary connexion.
“And if we be convinced of the supernatural
“origin

“ origin of christianity *upon other grounds*, we
 “ shall perhaps think it not improbable that an
 “ extraordinary display of divine power might
 “ accompany its first preaching; especially if we
 “ can perceive any valuable end to be *then* an-
 “ swered by it; and consequently may believe
 “ the miracles of the Gospel, although they
 “ should be of no immediate and direct use to
 “ ourselves.

“ Now, I think, whoever attentively considers
 “ the earliest records of christianity, must be
 “ struck with one very remarkable and indisput-
 “ able fact; which seems to shew, that it could
 “ be no other than a supernatural communica-
 “ tion; although it teaches nothing that is not
 “ perfectly agreeable to human reason, and per-
 “ haps nothing of great importance which is not
 “ naturally discoverable by it; and although all
 “ its leading doctrines may be collected from
 “ the writings of heathen philosophers, who, so
 “ far as we know, had no other guide than the
 “ light of nature. The fact I mean is, that THE

“ CLEARNESS,

“CLEARNESS, CONSISTENCY, COMPREHENSION,
“AND SUBLIMITY, OF THE SYSTEM OF DOC-
“TRINE CONTAINED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT,
“DEMONSTRATE A KNOWLEDGE OF THE IM-
“PORTANT SUBJECTS OF WHICH IT TREATS,
“ALTOGETHER DISPROPORTIONATE TO THE
“NATURAL MEANS OF INFORMATION POS-
“SESSED BY THE WRITERS; AND INFINITE-
“LY SURPASSING THE ACTUAL NATURAL AT-
“TAINMENTS OF THE HUMAN MIND, IN ANY
“PRECEDING OR SUBSEQUENT AGE, IN ANY
“PART OF THE HABITABLE GLOBE.

“The sages of ancient Greece, smit with the
“love of science, neglected no means of ac-
“quiring knowledge; travelled into remote re-
“gions in search of instruction from men and
“books, and devoted their lives to the study of
“philosophy. Such of their writings as have
“escaped the destroying hand of time, and the
“ravages of gothic ignorance, discover an ardour
“in the pursuit of truth, a persevering atten-
“tion to the cultivation of the intellectual powers,

“and

“ and an indefatigable patience in the investigation of the most interesting subjects of human enquiry, which must for ever command the admiration of mankind. They abound in fine observations on life and manners, and in the most dignified sentiments of moral virtue. But they abound also in errors and in doubts. Their authors differed from each other, and from themselves, on many important points of human conduct, and they were still less agreed on the interesting subject of future expectations.

“ The teacher of Nazareth, on the other hand, and his humble followers, were very far from being in favourable circumstances for the acquisition of knowledge. They were chiefly men of low circumstances, of mean employments, and without education. Jesus himself was the son of a poor carpenter, and probably worked many years with his father for his subsistence. We might be certain that he could read, if it had not been mentioned in his history, as that accomplishment was uni-

“ versal amongst his countrymen: but it is im-
 “ probable that he knew of any other books than
 “ those of the old Testament; nor is there the
 “ least trace of his acquaintance with any thing
 “ that had been done for the improvement
 “ of the human mind in the heathen world.
 “ Yet from this obscurity he suddenly emerg-
 “ ed ‘ to be a light to the gentiles and to be
 “ for salvation to the ends of the earth *.’
 “ Deriving nothing from human instruction, he
 “ surpassed all the philosophers in knowledge;
 “ and delineated with a master-hand the whole
 “ science of morals and divinity. Without assist-
 “ ance from the schools, he ‘ spake as never man
 “ spake †;’ and in easy and familiar discourses
 “ delivered a system of doctrine on the the trans-
 “ cendently important subjects of the govern-
 “ ment of God, and the duty and expectations of
 “ man, which is incapable of addition or im-
 “ provement, without error, and without de-
 “ fect.

“ Every fact must have its adequate cause.

* Acts xiii. 47.

† John vii. 46.

“ How

“ How then shall we explain this singular pheno-
 “ menon? How shall we account for it, that a
 “ poor untutored carpenter, should not only have
 “ made such advances in religious and moral
 “ knowledge, as to have exceeded this or that
 “ philosopher, but should have been so per-
 “ fectly master of these great subjects, as to have
 “ surpassed all the efforts of the wisest and most
 “ improved nations of the world? How, but by
 “ assenting to that which he himself uniformly
 “ declared,—that he derived not his knowledge
 “ from a human, but a supernatural source?
 “ ‘How knoweth this man letters,’ said the asto-
 “ nished Jews, ‘having never learned!’ And
 “ what other solution of the difficulty can possi-
 “ bly be offered, than that which proceeded from
 “ the mouth of the divine teacher himself?—‘the
 “ doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me *.’

“ If in this manner, by what is called internal
 “ evidence, it can be satisfactorily made appear
 “ to us at this day, that christianity justly lays
 “ claim to a supernatural origin, and is thus pro-

* John vii. 15, 16.

“ perly

“perly a miraculous dispensation, it cannot surely appear *prima facie* incredible, that its first preaching should be attended with a visible display of miraculous power. On the contrary, if it can be shewn that some important effect was to be *then* produced, some valuable end to be *then* answered by this display, it may be admitted as an *historical fact* without difficulty; always remembering, that, like other historical facts, the evidence of its truth depending upon *human testimony*, can amount only to *probability*, and by no means to *certainty*.”

“But what could that end be,” exclaimed I with eagerness? “You will oblige me by distinctly pointing it out.”

“To that I have not the least objection,” replied my friend, “if you have patience to hear me while I endeavour to state my idea of the design of christianity itself; or to examine what were the circumstances on account of which it pleased the sovereign Providence of heaven to raise up so extraordinary a person as Jesus at that time.”

I assured

I assured him this would add to my obligation, and he thus proceeded.

“ Man, by the constitution of that nature
 “ which God has given him, is a moral and in-
 “ telligent being; naturally furnished with the
 “ means of discovering the being and perfections
 “ of Deity, the truths of moral obligation, and
 “ a future state of rewards and punishments; and
 “ accordingly, *wherever there have been men*, in
 “ proportion as their powers have been exerted,
 “ these great truths have been more or less clearly
 “ apprehended *.

“ He

* The question whether religious and moral ideas are *natural*, has been the matter of very voluminous controversy. But is not this a dispute about words, or, at most, about a thing of no practical importance? If it be admitted on all hands, that men are so constituted and so situated, as necessarily to become possessed of these ideas, though in very different degrees of perfection, is it not idle to contend that they ought not to be called natural, because infants are not born divines and moralists? This mode of arguing would equally prove that teeth are not natural, because we have them not at our birth; or that walking is not natural, because none walk but those who are taught; that is, the whole human race! Disputes so frivolous may be kept *ad infinitum*. The following quotation exhibits the opinion of a man who had no opportunity

“He has also animal appetites, implanted
 “for wise purposes; but when indulged to ex-
 “cess, tending to enfeeble the moral powers, to
 “obscure the light of truth, and to introduce
 “into the mind confusion and misery. This un-
 “happy state of things has in some degree or
 “other taken place in all ages, and in every
 “part of the world; but at certain periods, and
 “in some countries, the corruption of principles

nity of deriving any advantage from supernatural revelation.
 “Nulla gens tam fera, nemo omnium tam fit immanis, cujus
 “mentem non imbuerit deorum opinio. Multi de diis prava
 “sentiant; id enim vitioso more effici solet: omnes tamen
 “esse vim et naturam divinam arbitrantur. Nec vero id col-
 “licutio hominum aut consensus efficit: non institutis opinio
 “est confirmata, non legibus. Omni autem in re consensus
 “omnium gentium, *lex naturæ* putanda est.”

No nation is so barbarous, no human being so savage, as to be unacquainted with the idea of God. It must be acknowledged, that many are led by the depraved state of their morals, to entertain very unworthy notions of their gods; but still all believe in some superior power. Nor is the origin of this persuasion to be traced to any combination or agreement; nor its continuance to be ascribed to laws or establishments; but in this, as in all other cases, the universal consent of mankind must be considered as the *dictate of nature*.

CIC. TUSCUL. I. 13.

“and

“ and manners has been so enormous, that it has
 “ pleased Almighty God, in his great wisdom and
 “ mercy, to make use of extraordinary methods
 “ for producing a reformation. He may have
 “ done so, in many instances, in ages and coun-
 “ tries, with whose history we are either imper-
 “ fectly or not at all acquainted. For as the
 “ Creator of all minds must necessarily have con-
 “ tinual access to all, it is at least possible, that
 “ supernatural communications may have been
 “ more numerous than is commonly supposed.
 “ He may have been, for ought we can say, the
 “ inspirer of those whom we are used to term Im-
 “ postors; of Confucius, Mango-Capac, and Ma-
 “ homet. But we have much better information
 “ concerning that memorable instance of his
 “ goodness to the world, the mission of Jesus,
 “ and the singular assistance afforded to that ex-
 “ traordinary person, in his generous and emi-
 “ nently successful efforts to revive the dying
 “ cause of religion and virtue; to turn men from
 “ darkness to light, and from the power of Satan,

“ or corrupt and vicious dispositions, to the fer-
“ vice of God. The period in which this great
“ person appeared was a very remarkable one ; it
“ was a period of great knowledge in some re-
“ spects, and of amazing stupidity in others.
“ The Roman empire was at its utmost height,
“ and the human sciences were cherished with
“ ardour ; while religion and morals, the most
“ important concerns of man, lay in a most lan-
“ guishing and deplorable state. This wretched
“ degeneracy is very accurately described by the
“ fine pen of the apostle Paul, who, while he la-
“ ments the corruption of the age, does not for-
“ get to assert the *universality and sufficiency of na-*
“ *tural religion*, in the clearest terms ; ascribing
“ all the evil, not to invincible ignorance, or
“ original depravity, but to the criminal inatten-
“ tion of mankind to the visible appearances of
“ Deity, in the works of his hands, and in the
“ methods of his providence *.

“ In order to effect a reformation, it was neces-

* Romans i.

“ *fary to rouse men from this moral lethargy, and to*
 “ *prevail upon them to attend to the voice of in-*
 “ *struction. By what method could this be done?*
 “ *By none, perhaps, so sure and certain in its ef-*
 “ *fect, as by the public display of miraculous*
 “ *power. The eyes of the most stupid of men*
 “ *would be naturally turned with admiration to-*
 “ *wards him, who could command the lame to*
 “ *walk, and the blind to see; and he who could*
 “ *satisfy the appetites of five or six thousand per-*
 “ *sons, with a few loaves of bread, could hardly*
 “ *fail to secure five thousand attentive hearers.*
 “ *In short, it appears to me, and if I am wrong, it*
 “ *is not for want of honest attention to the sub-*
 “ *ject, that the end of the public ministry of Je-*
 “ *sus was to reform the morals of men; and that*
 “ THE PRINCIPAL USE OF MIRACLES WAS TO
 “ AWAKEN THEIR ATTENTION TO HIS PREACH-
 “ ING. When this was done, and christianity
 “ had got footing in the world, miracles became
 “ no longer necessary. For as to any *new* doc-
 “ trines said to be taught by christianity; or any

“ new method of salvation proposed ; or any discoveries made which require supernatural confirmation ; it is incumbent on those who maintain their existence, to shew what they are. “ For my own part, I freely confess that I know of no such. Had the preaching of Jesus contained any thing of this kind, and had miracles been intended to give credibility to *what could not otherwise be proved*, then it should seem that miracles would be just as necessary to be performed *now*, as in the first century : since, as has been before observed, it is not easy to conceive how the *mere report* of a miraculous fact, which though probably true, yet may possibly be false, can be admitted as sufficient evidence of a new doctrine, which is either incredible in itself, or unsupported by other evidence.

“ But nothing surely could be farther from the intention of Jesus, than the introduction of a *new religion*. He well knew this was impossible. Religion, which is founded in the perceptions of God, and the nature of man, must
“ be

“be one invariable thing. Accordingly the doc-
 “trines which he taught were precisely the same
 “with those of natural religion; which, if men
 “could once be brought seriously to attend to
 “them, wanted no other confirmation than that
 “natural evidence, which St. Paul affirms to be
 “so full and complete as to leave those without
 “excuse who neglect them, and to afford the
 “most entire satisfaction to the sincere and im-
 “partial mind. And as they wanted no addi-
 “tional evidence, neither were they capable of
 “any. What can the *history of a miracle*, which
 “must always have something of uncertainty
 “about it, do towards confirming a truth, which
 “is already supported by more than sufficient
 “evidence of an indisputable kind? If I would
 “discourse for instance on the Being and Provi-
 “dence of God, it may, perhaps, be necessary to
 “work a miracle in order to secure an audience;
 “but is it possible to conceive, that any *history* of
 “a miracle which I shall be able to relate, can
 “add any thing to that irresistible torrent of evi-

“ dence on these great subjects, which pours in
 “ from every surrounding object * ?

“ The same observation may be extended
 “ to moral truths, and to a future state. The
 “ *natural revelation* which it has pleased God to
 “ give of these important truths is, in most cases,
 “ clear and certain : and if it be not always equal
 “ to mathematical demonstration, it is still abundantly
 “ sufficient to furnish very powerful motives for the regulation of the conduct; which
 “ is all that can be hoped for from the proudest
 “ claim to supernatural communication: with
 “ this unspeakable advantage in favour of na-

* Quid potest esse tam apertum, tamque perspicuum, cum coelum suspeximus, cœlestiaque contemplati sumus, quam esse aliquod numen præstantissimæ mentis, quo hæc regantur ?

When we lift our eyes to the heavens, and contemplate the celestial bodies, what can be more clearly evident, than the existence of some superior being of consummate wisdom, by whom they are governed ?

CIC. de Natur. Deor. Lib. ii. Cap. 2.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy work. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.—Psalm xix.

“ tural

“ tural religion, that whoever undertakes to in-
 “ culcate its pure and salutary maxims, is on a
 “ footing of perfect equality with his fellow men.
 “ He can assume no dictatorial authority, nor ex-
 “ act from them any implicit obedience. As he
 “ cannot have the shadow of pretence for ‘ do-
 “ minion over their faith,’ he must content him-
 “ self with being the ‘ helper of their joy*.’

“ To this natural evidence however, be it more
 “ or less, it is certain that our great instructor ap-
 “ pealed. He pointed to the lilies of the field,
 “ and to the birds of the air; and taught men
 “ to deduce the doctrine of an eternal Provi-
 “ dence from the provision made for sparrows.
 “ He argued from the paternal character, the
 “ readiness of the one God and father of all, to
 “ hear the prayers of his intelligent and moral
 “ offspring, and to bestow upon the rightly dis-
 “ posed mind, with no sparing hand, whatever
 “ can promote its real welfare. He adverted to
 “ the dignity of the human nature, so noble in
 “ reason! so infinite in faculties! and of so

* 2 Cor. i. 24.

“ much

“ much higher destination than the merely ve-
 “ getable and animal creation ; and he exhort-
 “ ed his hearers, in the most persuasive language,
 “ not to waste their lives in an unremitting at-
 “ tention to the perishing objects of time and
 “ sense, as if immortal minds were of no more
 “ value than the ‘ grass which to-day is in the
 “ field, and to-morrow is cast into the oven *,’
 “ but to ‘ provide themselves a treasure in the
 “ heavens that faileth not, where no thief ap-
 “ proacheth, neither moth corrupteth † !’ But
 “ before our divine teacher could have any op-
 “ portunity of thus instructing the multitude, be-
 “ fore he could bring them to listen to his inva-
 “ luable teaching, it was necessary to awaken their
 “ drowsy minds by the splendour of his miracles.

“ This I imagine to have been the great
 “ end of miracles, supposing them to have been
 “ really performed ; of which I have already ac-
 “ knowledged we can have no *certainty*. I can-
 “ not, however, help thinking it probable, be-
 “ cause it appears that in a very surprising de-

* Luke xii. 28.

† Luke xii. 33.

“ gree this great end was happily effected. The
 “ being, the perfections, the moral providence of
 “ GOD, and the future expectations of man, be-
 “ came a favourite study; and men of all ranks
 “ and degrees, as well the scientific as the illi-
 “ terate, became desirous of knowing more per-
 “ fectly, that ‘ love of GOD which passeth know-
 “ ledge!’ The consequences of this turn given
 “ to the taste of mankind, if the expression may
 “ be allowed, were in the highest degree favour-
 “ able to morals. The conduct of those who
 “ joined themselves to the christian name, though
 “ not in all instances alike, was yet generally so
 “ pure and peaceable, their tempers so kind and
 “ benevolent, their patience under sufferings so
 “ eminent, and their hope of immortality so
 “ triumphant, that the followers of Jesus became
 “ the admiration of the world; and ‘ the joy that
 “ was set before him,’ and for which he so cheer-
 “ fully submitted to the malice of the enemies of
 “ truth and virtue, seemed now to be no longer
 “ in prospect, but to be actually realized.

My

My friend, warmed by his subject, still proceeded.

“What a delightful state of things,” said he,
“could this primitive simplicity have been pre-
“served ! But, alas ! how soon was the glory of
“this great reformation obscured. The pride
“of the heathen converts, in imitation of that
“absurd superstition from which they had been
“so lately called, began to exalt its humble foun-
“der into a God, a title which, when on earth,
“he would have rejected with abhorrence.
“When they had proceeded thus far, they fan-
“cied that the doctrines which he taught, so
“consonant to the uncorrupted sentiments of the
“human mind, were too plain and simple to
“be worthy of so great a being. They would
“have christianity to be something mysterious
“and incomprehensible; something to astonish
“and confound the understanding, instead of en-
“lightening and instructing it; and, O fatal and
“deplorable error ! something by means of which
“an *established and endowed priesthood* might be
“enabled

“ enabled to maintain and increase its power and
 “ authority over the people. To this end, while
 “ they made light of the truths of natural reli-
 “ gion, the eternal rock on which pure christi-
 “ anity was founded, they invented and propa-
 “ gated, with furious zeal, the fictions of original
 “ sin, election and reprobation, eternal punish-
 “ ment, satisfaction for sin by the death of Christ,
 “ church authority, and a number of sacraments
 “ to be administered by sacred hands—all irre-
 “ conciliable with right reason, and the perfec-
 “ tions of Deity, but all wonderfully calculated
 “ to keep in awe the ignorant, who are always
 “ the great majority of mankind *. The light
 “ which

* Ignorance and credulity have ever been companions, and have misled and enslaved mankind; philosophy has in all ages endeavoured to oppose their progress, and to loosen the shackles they had imposed. Philosophers have on this account been called unbelievers. Unbelievers of what? of the fictions of fancy, of witchcraft, hobgoblins, apparitions, vampires, fairies; of the influence of stars on human actions, miracles wrought by the bones of saints, the flight of ominous birds, the predictions of the bowels of dying animals, expounders of dreams, fortunetellers, conjurers, modern prophets, necromancy, chiromancy, animal magnetism, with endless variety

“ which Jesus and his disciples had thrown on
 “ moral subjects became almost extinguished ;
 “ and the short triumph of knowledge and virtue,
 “ was succeeded by a long and dismal night of ig-
 “ norance, superstition, and tyranny, from which
 “ we are at this day only beginning to emerge.

“ A beginning however has certainly been
 “ made. The labours of learned and sincere
 “ enquirers after truth, have demonstrated that
 “ many things heretofore supposed essential to
 “ christianity, neither belong to *it*, nor to *any*
 “ true system of religion. As free investigation

riety of folly ? These they have disbelieved and despised, but have ever bowed their hoary heads to Truth and Nature.

Mankind may be divided in respect to the facility of their belief or conviction, into two classes ; those who are ready to assent to single facts from the evidence of their senses, or from the serious assertions of others ; and those who require analogy to corroborate or authenticate them.——This analogy pre-supposes an acquired knowledge of things ; hence children and ignorant people are the most credulous, as not possessing much knowledge of the usual course of nature ; and secondly, those are most credulous whose faculty of comparing ideas, or the voluntary exertion of it, is slow and imperfect. Of this kind are the bulk of mankind ; they continue throughout their lives in a state of childhood, and have thus been *the dupes of priests and politicians in all ages and in all countries of the world.*

DARWIN'S Zoonomia.

“ proceeds,

“ proceeds, the load of absurdity under which
 “ truth has so long been buried, will by degrees
 “ be removed, and it will be restored to its na-
 “ tive beauty. Amongst other particulars, I have
 “ no hesitation in supposing, that it already ap-
 “ pears with sufficient evidence, that Jesus, about
 “ whose person and office the world has so long
 “ and so widely differed, was no other than what
 “ his immediate followers described him to have
 “ been in their first public discourses after his
 “ death, namely, ‘ A MAN, APPROVED OF GOD,
 “ BY MIRACLES AND WONDERS AND SIGNS
 “ WHICH GOD DID BY HIM ;’ that is, an emi-
 “ nent teacher of moral and religious truth,
 “ whose labours it pleased heaven in an extraor-
 “ dinary manner to assist; but who had no other
 “ doctrine to inculcate, because there was no
 “ other which it concerned mankind to know,
 “ than those which, however sadly neglected, had
 “ been always known, namely, an universal Pro-
 “ vidence, a future state, and the absolute neces-
 “ sity of applying before all things to the cultiva-
 “ tion of the moral powers, in order to answer

“ the true end, and to attain to the highest enjoyment of our being.

“ If in this attempt to delineate christianity,” continued my friend, “ I have been successful, it will appear to be entitled to regard, not on the footing of *authority*, but on account of its intrinsic excellence, the importance of its doctrines, the purity of its moral, and the solidity of its reasonings; and the question concerning the reality of miracles, may be discussed with the utmost calmness and impartiality, and even with *perfect indifference as to the result*. For if, after fair enquiry, they should appear to any man to be the invention of early christians, warmly but indiscreetly zealous for the honour of their illustrious teacher, such an one will have the satisfaction to reflect, that all that is valuable in the New Testament, all that entitles it to superior estimation in comparison with other books, will remain unaffected by this discovery. While, on the other hand, those who, after the same dispassionate enquiry, shall be of opinion, that the reality of miracles is supported by the highest

“ highest probability, which is the utmost that
 “ can be rationally asserted, will still consider
 “ them, not as proofs of the truth of christianity
 “ to this distant age, but as expedients to gain
 “ attention to it from those to whom it was ori-
 “ ginally addressed. In our situation, *it is not the*
 “ *miracles that prove the truth of the religion; but*
 “ *it is the truth of the religion that proves the mi-*
 “ *racles.* It is the PERFECTION OF THE DOC-
 “ TRINE which is itself the *grand miracle*, and
 “ which renders probable all the rest. Imagine
 “ for a moment the absence of this essential cir-
 “ cumstance, and all the learning of a Lardner *
 “ will

* With the writings of this great man I had but a very
 slight acquaintance till in 1788, Mr. Johnson, much to his
 honour, favoured the world with a complete and accurate edi-
 tion in eleven volumes 8vo. at a very low price. I then began
 seriously to study the vast mass of evidence which the learned
 and laborious author had collected, to prove the genuineness of
 the books of the New Testament, and the authenticity of the
 Gospel history, upon the ground of testimony. But what was
 the effect upon my mind? Nothing short of an entire con-
 viction of the extreme obscurity and difficulty in which the
 subject is involved. Upon enquiry amongst the intelligent
 part of my acquaintance, I found to my surprise that my case
 was by no means singular. And I am strongly inclined to be-
 lieve,

“ will be insufficient to shew, that the wonders
“ of the New Testament are entitled to any
“ higher credit, than the fables of Æsop, or the
“ fictions of Homer.”

Here, though I was far from wishing it, it became necessary to put an end to the conversation. I took leave of my friend with thanks for his unreserved communication, and fully determined to reconsider the subject; and I hope my reader is in the same disposition.

lieve, that the general effect of reading this elaborate work will be very different indeed from that which the excellent author intended.

THE END.

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